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CALIFORNIA RECOGNIZES MAY AS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

SACRAMENTO – May 2005 will be celebrated as Mental Health Month around the country, marking an important opportunity for policymakers, the media and stakeholders to speak out and raise public awareness about mental health issues.

“Mental illness has no boundaries. It impacts the lives of many people with no regard to age, ethnicity, gender or income,” said Dr. Stephen Mayberg, director of the California Department of Mental Health (DMH). “We must promote the understanding that mental health illnesses are real, treatable conditions, and those who live with these conditions deserve to be helped and not stigmatized or discriminated against.”

Outreach efforts will occur throughout the state this month. Many of these events will focus specifically on eliminating the stigma associated with mental illness; for example:

- On May 13, the Didi Hirsch Community Center in Los Angeles will present an “Erasing the Stigma Leadership Award” to talk show host Larry King.
- On May 20, the Santa Clara Valley Mental Health Department will partner with local businesses to host the 2005 Mental Health Fair, “Your Voice Matters.”
- On May 21 in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, thousands will participate in a walk to increase awareness of mental illnesses, sponsored by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI).

In California, one in five families is directly affected by mental illness, and thousands more experience the profound consequences indirectly as they watch their friends or loved ones struggle with this illness. There are many mental illness conditions, the most commonly recognized of which include anxiety disorders, mood disorders, schizophrenia and psychosis. Estimates show that 20 percent of the U.S. population will suffer from a mental illness at some point in their lives.

“These mental illnesses are real and have physical manifestations that can be triggered by life events,” said Mayberg. “They can be as treatable as any physical ailment, but many people who could benefit from treatment may not seek help because of the

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stigma associated with mental illness.”

In addition, representation of persons with mental illness in the media has oftentimes been negative. There is a tendency to portray persons with mental illnesses as violent, when in fact they are more likely to be victims than perpetrators. Society must move beyond the stereotypes and understand that these are individuals who have the same hopes, dreams and aspirations as everybody else. They deserve compassion and support, rather than condemnation and discrimination.

“If we continue to work to erase stigma, we will begin to see more courageous people come forward to willingly acknowledge their mental illnesses to demonstrate how treatment and support have helped them lead more productive lives,” said Mayberg.

California is already leading the way, as witnessed by voters last year passing Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act, which will ultimately provide more than \$1 billion in funding for mental health programs and services. As the act specifies, community members will play an integral role in directing how monies are spent. Many counties are already holding public forums where community members can speak about what kind of services and programs are most needed. This feedback will assist counties in designing their mental health programs.

“By passing Proposition 63, Californians validated the fact that mental health issues are important,” said Kim Belshé, secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency. “Too many Californians have experienced the consequences of untreated mental illness and have been unable to fulfill their potential. The Mental Health Services Act gives us the unique opportunity to transform California’s mental health system, thereby giving hope to this vulnerable population.”

For more information about mental health issues or how to combat the stigma associated with mental illness, please log on to DMH’s Website at www.dmh.ca.gov.

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